DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 225 509 HE 015 871

AUTHOR Spinelli, Teri
TITLE Declining Undergraduate Student Performance in Higher Education.
PUB DATE Dec 81
NOTE 16p.
PUB TYPE Viewpoints (120)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Academic Achievement; Academic Aspiration; *Academic Standards; Administrative Policy; Classroom Environment; *College Students; Federal Regulation; Government School Relationship; Grade Inflation; Higher Education; *Low Achievement; Public Policy; Student Attitudes; *Student Motivation; Student Teacher Relationship; *Teacher Attitudes; Underachievement

ABSTRACT

Factors contributing to declining academic performance of college students are considered, including: increased government intervention in education, declining faculty expectations and lowered standards, administrative policies, and changing student attitudes and expectations. One view is that government is largely responsible for the deterioration in academic standards and performance through funding requirements and mandates to higher education to accommodate underprepared students. It is claimed that many faculty members have been forced to relax course content and requirements in order to accommodate underprepared students, while others have sought popularity or personal relationships with students at the expense of maintaining high academic standards. Administrative procedures that encourage poor attitudes toward learning include: relaxing admissions policies; and using student evaluations of faculty performance in promotion, tenure, or salary decisions. It is suggested that many students undertaking independent study options are unable to fulfill the requirements or are not mature enough to work independently. An indication of deteriorating academic performance is grade inflation and the decline in general test scores, such as Scholastic Aptitude Test scores. (SW)

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DECLINING UNDERGRADUATE STUDENT PERFORMANCE IN HIGHER EDUCATION

by

Teri Spinelli
Asst. Professor of Marketing
Oakland University

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School of Economics and Management
Oakland University
Rochester, Michigan 8063

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December 1981

HE 015 871

Declining Undergraduate Student Performance in Higher Education

The issue of declining student performance at the university level continues to be an area of great concern for many educators. It may behoove us, therefore, to reflect once again, on some of the major factors that appear to have contributed to this decline. Such a review may serve to remind us of the responsibilities we all have toward the total educational development of our college and university students.

These factors include: increased government intervention in education; declining faculty expectations and the corresponding decrease in standards for student performance; administrative policies that emerge in an effort to combat declining enrollments and that attempt to satisfy social pressure groups; and, lastly, the changing attitudes and expectations of the students themselves.

The Government

Many assert that the state and federal governments are largely responsible for the deterioration in academic standards which have resulted in the decline in student performance and attitudes in higher education. Mandates are issued regularly

instructing educators to embrace affirmative action programs; to re-evaluate traditional teaching methods; to redesign testing procedures; to investigate alternative criteria for earning college credits; and to award scholarships based on need rather than scholarly achievement. All of these procedures are designed to accommodate and facilitate a higher education to anyone who desires it, regardless of aptitude, ability or motivation. Fincher (1977) describes the effect that government intervention has had on the caliber of students that have invaded campuses in the last two decades.

> Where groups of students have been referred to in the past as marginal or academically handicapped, the federal programs of the 1960s produced a pervasive concern for students who were culturally deprived, economically dispossessed, or educationally disadvantaged.

In addition, colleges who receive federal grants are forced to cooperate or lose their funds. They, thus, become obligated to make these programs succeed--even at the cost of relaxing standards. The overall effect is a marked decrease in the power and independence of the university to control its own standards. Eric Severeid, well-known news commentator, voiced the laymen's conclusion relevant to this decline in his September 1, 1977 CBS News Commentary: "In attempting to accommodate underprepared and unwilling students, academic standards have greatly depreciated over the last 10 years."

While educators don't object to any efforts which improve the quality of education and insure democracy on the campus, many question the success of these programs. Mulka and Sheerin (1975) mirrored the opinion of a great many professors when they stated that the collegiate programs designed to remedy or compensate the academically handicapped have had less than desirable results.

The Faculty

Faculty have also contributed to the decline in academic performance, largely because of the pressure placed on them by administrators and students alike. Many academicians have been forced to relax course contents and requirements in order to accommodate the inept recipient of higher education. A study by Riesman and colleagues (1970) of two large midwestern universities identified common procedural changes that support this statement:

> When the humanities faculty finally recognized the opacity of the analytic approach for the majority of their students, they altered the first course to make it less analytical, less sophisticated and demanding. (p. 229)

Additional changes were adopted by faculty members at this institution when it became clear that students could not meet their original expectations: "The natural science instructors geared themselves down to cover the material in the syllabus slowly, so that students could pass the examinations" (p. 185).

Unfortunately, some educators appear to have developed an attitude of bitterness toward those students who seem to have been admitted on credentials other than intellectual ability. Riesman, Gusfield, and Gamson related in their 1970 report that:

> Host professors prefer to teach their own discipline or potential disciples, not bored undergraduate captives or uncommitted shoppers . . . he (the professor) does not want to have to dilute or simplify the insights and subtleties that are the fruits of his competence. This ambition to teach one's own disciples does not seem . . . mean spirited in light of frequent experience with ordinary, uncommitted students who are or may appear collegiate, frivolous and unwilling. (p. 7)

Correspondingly, some professors have willingly reduced or altered traditional instructional methods in order to achieve popularity and positive student evaluations--the criteria often being his ability to make the class "fun" or interesting. Chester Handleman (1979), in his article, "The Decline in Academic Standards," points out that

> Some instructors are more interested in increasing their class sizes by becoming popular . . . . They constantly offer films and rap sessions instead of substantive information and learnings skills . . . [which] requires little rigourous effort from them [students]. (p. 57)

Handleman admonishes the use of any innovative teaching methods that he believes, "have promised so much but have delivered so little to the improvement of education" (p. 57).

This drive for popularity by some professors is often achieved by encouraging social relationships with students which are considered unnecessarily intimate and which place additional pressures on the educators. It becomes extremely difficult to objectively evaluate or discipline a "drinking buddy"; and, by the same token, students are given a false sense of academic security by such a friendship. In addition, those professors appear to create a new standard of educator-student relationship, thereby making it uncomfortable for others who are unwilling to relate to students in a social setting. To illustrate, Riesman, Gusfield, and Gamson indicated in their 1970 book that "some (students) demanded more attention and intimacy than faculty were prepared to give" (p. 186).

The effect of such relationships on student performance are likely to be evidenced by the frequency with which grades are inflated through time extensions on assignments, "extra help" sessions, additional work given to make up poor work, dropping the lowest test score when calculating the final grade, permitting self-evaluation by the students, and, in some cases, actually completing the work for the student.

The Administrators

Because university leaders appear to be under a great deal of pressure from external forces, they have begun to support policies and procedures that may threaten academic freedom and that often encourage poor attitudes toward learning.

Noting a typical policy change that affected the attitudes of both students and faculty, Riesman, et al. (1970) reported that:

> Students were given the option of dropping a course any time up to nine weeks after the 16 week term began--three weeks longer than the earlier time limit. The midterm grade could thus act as a signal for the student; it also worked as a control on the instructor, who would find it more difficult to fail students if he allowed them to think they were doing adequately, and thus not exercise the drop option. (p. 153)

Many educators are especially concerned about relaxed admissions policies, especially as they apply to professional schools. The problem was well stated by Dr. Bernard Davis in a 1976 Newsweek magazine article: "In their eagerness to help disadvantaged students, some medical schools are handing out diplomas to people who may not be qualified as doctors" (p. 74). Although Dr. Davis favors preferential admissions policies for these students, he warns against "succumbing to

the temptation to award . . . diplomas on a charitable basis" (p. 74).

Still another administrative procedure that faculties are becoming increasingly sensitive to is the issue of student evaluations and their effect on professional promotion, tenure, or salary increases. Although many standardized forms carry a statement that denies any relationship between a favorable evaluation and upward mobility, many educators are well aware of the significance these reports have had on the longevity of their colleagues within a particular institution.

In addition, some administrators have counseled students to avoid professors who may have acquired a reputation for stringency or high academic expectations. On study, conducted by Riesman and his coauthors (1970) at a large university, uncovered an underground-type of communications network between administrators and students that supports this statement: "There developed a kind of infrastructure of administrators and auxilliary personnel who . . . advised students on how to shop around for courses that would be less taxing" (p. 224). In 1968 the authors had an opportunity to revisit this institution where they had performed their research. In questioning one administrator about the marked effects of past policy changes, he responded that although "the grades were getting a bit too high, with a B- becoming the model grade . . . he dared not complain lest the faculty in a stampede reverse its relative leniency on the assumption that now they could afford to" (p. 153).

The Students

Perhaps the largest, single most contributing factor to the decline in academic performance is the attitudes on the part of the students toward the institution, the faculty, themselves and education in general. It is no secret that many students "shop" for colleges and programs that require the minimum amount of effort, time, and scholarship. Even in the light of this advantage, there has been a marked increase in absenteeism, incomplete or nonperformance of assignments, dropped courses, and switched majors. Riesman, Gusfield, and Gamson pointed out that ". . . [students] would not show up at classes, miss deadlines on assignments, or drop out of the College altogether" (p. 186). The 1976 Newsweek article mentioned earlier supports this statement: "Some teachers say they have abandoned requiring much outside work from students because students simply won't do it; thus they (the professors) have caved into the pressure" (p. 74).

In addition, there appears to be an associated increase in independent study requests--some admit in an effort to avoid traditional courses that are considered structured (and that frequently eliminate testing). Many students are unable to meet the competencies or fulfill the requirements, and often do not have the maturity level necessary to work independently. One professor lamented to me:

> The first time we let students be completely independent. The second time, we made independent

> study more structured because students didn't do their work until the last minute. The third time, we asked them to give feedback throughout so they wouldn't be left to pace themselves.

These alterations in outside-the-classroom assignments, the extension of course withdrawal deadlines and the strict controls imposed on independent study participants have been adopted on campuses across the country in an effort to reduce the failure rates that would have resulted from an adherence to traditional formats.

Students' attitudes toward professors have also changed considerably in recent times. When considering instructional competency criteria, students will often cite an instructor's skill in keeping their interest or amusing them over an extended period of time. Morstain and Goff conducted a study, published in 1977, to determine which specific instructional areas students felt needed improvement. Of the 3,409 responses received from 16 "diverse" institutions, the highest ranking statements dealt with the professor's ability to "enliven" or "vitalize" classroom environment. One of the professors involved in the survey summarized the results by saying that: "Students just want to be entertained, not taught" (p. 302). Although the researchers suggest that revitalization may very well be a valid issue, many educators agree with the anonymous professor that the study only supports the theory that many students expect the classoom to be an entertaining experience. One of

the major findings of the report underscores the Mulka and Sheerin (1975) study: "If students . . . do not find what they may have expected or hoped for in college, or if they aren't doing well academically, then they attach greater priority to these (teaching) improvements."

Another much discussed indication of deteriorating academic performance is the decline in general test scores, such as SATs and GREs, coupled with grade inflation. As was reported in Higher Education and National Affaires (1978), from 1967 to 1978 the average total verbal score on these tests dropped 37 points, while the average math score fell 24 points (SAT).

A panel established by the College Entrance Examination Board in 1975 to determine the causes for the decline in test scores concluded that the primary causes were the sharp (compositional changes in the group of students taking this college entrance examination and a combination of relaxed teaching and learning standards . . . ." (p. 45). The panel further indicated that "there has been an apparent marked diminuation in young peoples' learning motivation, at least as it appears to be related . . . to their performance on college entrance examinations" (p. 48).

In some instances, educators have encouraged grade inflation by utilizing a more flexible grading procedure. The Riesman, Gusfield, and Gamson (1970) study describes one method that professors have used to retain students by forcing grades

up: "The social scientists allowed many students to take Incompletes and to improve their final grades after a course was over . . . . Grades were thereby given a more fluid value" (p. 106). By 1964 student faliure at this university dropped from 7 percent to 2 percent, and the average grade rose from 2.04 to 2.75 (p. 153). No doubt, that average grade is even higher today.

Grades also indicate, to a certain degree, the attitudes many students develop toward a professor. Interestingly, when a student has performed well he often responds, "I got an A," however, when the results are less than satisfactory, he complains that, "She gave me a D." One can only wonder at the ease with which responsibility for achievement, by many students, is shifted to the instructor.

Conclusion

Higher education has historically been considered a privilege and an opportunity for scholarly individuals to contribute to, and advance, the development of knowledge in order to benefit themselves and society.

In light of this traditional objective, it would seem that the emphasis ought to be on study and research rather than on ease and speed of learning. Many institutions have recently asserted the need to emphasize the value of academic achievement, in particular as it applies to a liberal arts curriculum. Although we cannot immediately effect a change in students'

performance and attitudes in higher education, we can begin to stress the need and desirability to achieve high levels of academic scholarship. Administrators, in particular those who are in a position to communicate with government representatives, can impress upon those leaders the importance of encouraging and supporting those students who evidence a desirable level of academic achievement--regardless of race, creed, sex, age or financial condition.

Notes

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